



WERY early one Monday morning in October 1979, I answered the phone to find it was Alan Curtis, the man who had played a large part in saving Aston Martin Lagonda four years before, when the company was facing liquidation by its former owners (we had met then, when I was covering the story for an American magazine). He told me what everyone was to learn from a national newspaper the following Thursday: that an AML consortium had approached British Leyland with an offer to buy MG and take over the Abingdon plant — an offer made within a month of the shock announcement that BL was to discontinue MG production and shut the plant down.

That offer, when made public, was welcomed by MG owners and Abingdon workers alike, who saw it as a heaven-sent opportunity to escape the dead hand of Leyland control that had stifled MG development for more than a decade, while pouring some £70 million into the ill-fated TR7/8 programme. To me — I have to admit it, though I was later proved wrong — the plan seemed to make sense, with the two companies as ideal partners in medium-volume sports car production. The development skills of AML, already demonstrated by the futuristic Towns-designed Lagonda (and, as some of us knew, Keith Martin's still-secret Bulldog), would be supported by MG's 50-year record for building cars efficiently and well in a low-cost, minimal-investment plant. As Curtis told me, "Abingdon is so much like Newport Pagnell. There's the same basic background, the same traditions, the same philosophy of loyalty and enthusiasm; they *want* to work there, to build those motor-cars, because they believe in MG. And it's incredible that that should be thrown away."

Well, it didn't work out in the end, because Curtis failed to secure enough financial backing. Subsequently the project came in for some caustic comments by Sir Michael Edwardes in his book, *Back from the Brink* — but if anybody doubted that AML's approach was serious, they do Curtis an injustice, for Newport Pagnell invested a lot of time and effort over the next six months in their plans to build MGs. I knew that William Towns had been commissioned to design not only an interim facelift model to be launched in late 1980, but also a range of new-look MGs to succeed it in 1983/4. When the project folded I asked AML for permission to publish details of those designs, but was turned down because there were still hopes of using them in another connection.

Remodelled MGB

Those hopes also faded, however, and a short time ago Alan Curtis sent me the information I had first sought some four years ago. About the same time Chris Peacock, head of Abingdon at the time of its closure, put me on the trail of the prototype 1981 MGB that Newport Pagnell built. Having languished in a corner since the project was abandoned, this remodelled MGB was sold last year to a nearby garage owner, refurbished by Camelot Autos of Bedford, and recently passed into the ownership of a private enthusiast, Ian May, who lives only a dozen miles from Newport Pagnell and was good enough to let us photograph his car.

For the basis of AML's remodelled MGB we have to go back as far as 1977, when one of British Leyland's own forward planning committees recommended a major facelift so that this ageing two-seater, then scheduled to cease production at the end of 1983, could be kept going until the end of 1985. In a confidential memo their Sports Car Study Group advised introducing this remodelled MGB by 1982, not only in the USA (where BL's own sales organisation guaranteed a steady sale of 20,000 cars a year), but also in six European markets which BL had abandoned. "Jaguar-Rover-Triumph can ill afford," said the committee, "to dispense with a model range which currently achieves a total sales volume of approximately

35,000 units per annum . . . as it is unlikely that the longer wheelbase and repanelled TR7 will capture MGB sales."

The committee's detailed recommendations included improving performance by turbocharging or modifying cylinder head design, offering an optional five-speed gearbox, replacing lever-arm by telescopic shock-absorbers front and rear, reducing ride height if possible, fitting new impact-absorbing bumpers, and a Targa-style rollover bar. They also advised a return to the traditional MG front grille, restyling the tail with new rear lamps, and fitting a deeper windscreen with a new top and new door-glasses to suit.

Aston Martin's MG

**When AML hoped
to take over MG, they designed
a range of new models to
succeed the MGB which have
been top secret until now.
F Wilson McComb
tells all**

Though the committee's advice was ignored by BL, there can be little doubt that part of that report, at least, found its way eventually to Newport Pagnell, where the managing director was an ex-BMC man, John Symonds. And, of course, Coventry Hood and Sidescreens, longtime suppliers of such components to Abingdon, formed a part of the CHS Industrials Group — which had a substantial interest in Aston Martin Lagonda . . .

The facelifted MGB built at Newport Pagnell did, indeed, have a deeper windscreen — it was, in fact, that of the MGB GT, matched to GT door glasses; these should really have had more curvature and a properly-radiused rear corner, but there wasn't time to alter their design. Likewise the new top, hurriedly made with the aid of an old Spitfire frame, was less than ideal in shape, didn't match the door-glasses too well, and had no quarter-lights at the rear. Paradoxically, the front quarter ventilators had been retained in the door-glasses although the US importers had advised deleting them. The rear of the car was restyled surprisingly easily with a mock-up panel across the tail incorporating fog-warning and reversing lights, together with an inset number-plate. On the prototype, this panel covered both the standard reversing lights and the filler-cap; in fact the car had no filler at all!

There was insufficient time to produce new recuperative-strut bumpers, so the ugly polyurethane type were retained, but by removing the original chrome waistline beading and fitting deep black rubbing-strips on the sides, Towns cleverly reduced the *apparent* height of the car, while making the bumpers themselves less obtru-

sive by linking them together visually. He also fitted a deep front airdam and a vestigial MG front grille, reminiscent of the type used on 1973/4 MGBs. The standard Rostyle wheels were replaced on the prototype by white-painted Wolfrace Turbo wheels, though Towns' concept drawings show wheels of a different type. The interior of the car was scarcely changed, apart from a smaller steering wheel and Recaro-like seats made by Tickford.

As refurbished by Camelot Autos, the prototype AML/MGB differs little from the original concept. The front is much the same, except that the grille is now black to match the front bumper and airdam. Narrower proprietary lamps at the rear replace the plastic mock-ups of before and, logically perhaps, the fog lights are now on the outside where they define the width of the vehicle better. There is a standard Lucas lamp on the bumper to illuminate the number-plate, instead of the sidelit arrangement favoured by AML. There is also a neat filler flap let into the offside rear wing — though it cannot have been used very often, the total recorded mileage being 266! The seats, formerly non-adjustable, have now been fitted on runners.

New concept

But all of this, of course, was merely Stage I of AML's plans for MG, scheduled for introduction in 1981. The next step, Stage II, is revealed by Towns' concept drawings for a specially-printed promotional folder, a copy of which Alan Curtis sent to me. To quote from this:

"Stage II is designed around a new marketing concept for MG cars reaching into the Nineties. Planned for introduction in 1983/84, this car, while using possibly the entire floor pan, sills and wheelarches of the present car . . . is intended to follow a combination of more advanced styling allied to the MG quality of simplicity. The body concept, however, will centre around an open soft-top two seater, with a removable bootlid that allows a variety of detachable hardtops, each creating a cohesive vehicle in its own right, from hatchback coupé to fastback 'GT' or sporting estate. Thus one base vehicle can provide its owner with a transition from bachelorhood, through marital bliss, to a young family and even back again."

William Towns' Stage II designs, here made public for the first time, show what a simple but dramatic concept it was. When I asked for his comments, he told me: "It's a little bee that I've had in my bonnet for many years. If you get a certain shape in a certain way, it becomes possible to have this interchangeability without a visual disadvantage in each model. A long time ago I made it as a proposal for . . . well, let's just say a certain other motor car company. But they didn't take it up, so I thought I'd use it again on the MG. And it still hasn't appeared on a production car."

"The concept sketches were done primarily to demonstrate the interchangeable hardtop bit, and as I recall they were rather crisp. The final design would not have been so hard, so spikey. It would have had a much softer shape altogether."

Towns also told me he had even gone to the extent of making a 'clay', complete with its two-seater, 2+2 and estate car hardtops. "I think it was 0.4 scale — I prefer big models when I'm working on a serious project because you can get so much more detail in." Inevitably, the model was broken up, as clay models always are, but Towns remembered taking a set of transparencies which he sent to Aston Martin Lagonda. Where are those pictures today? "Probably in Japan, I should think."

Very probably indeed, for that was where Alan Curtis eventually sought the financial backing for taking over MG manufacture. If the editor will pay my air fare, I'm quite prepared to go and look for them . . .